

APPLICATION
FOR
UNITED STATES LETTERS PATENT

TITLE: LOCK-IN PINNED PHOTODIODE PHOTO-DETECTOR
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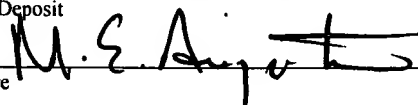
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LOCK IN PINNED PHOTODIODE PHOTODETECTORCross Reference To Related Applications

This application is a continuation of U.S. Patent
5 Application No. 09/378,565, filed August 19, 1999 (allowed),
which claims the benefit of the U.S. Provisional Application No.
60/097,135, filed on August 19, 1998, which is incorporated
herein by reference.

Background

Certain applications require measuring aspects that are
based on the speed of light.

For example, range finding can be carried out using optics.
An optical signal is sent. The reflection therefrom is
received. The time that it takes to receive the reflection of
the optical signal gives an indication of the distance.

The so called lock-in technique uses an encoded temporal
pattern as a signal reference. The device locks into the
received signal to find the time of receipt. However, noise can
20 mask the temporal pattern.

A lock in photodetector based on charged coupled devices or
CCDs has been described in Miagawa and Kanada "CCD based range
finding sensor" IEEE Transactions on Electronic Devices, volume
44 pages 1648-1652 1997.

25 CCDs are well known to have relatively large power

consumption.

Summary

The present application describes a special kind of lock in
5 detector formed using CMOS technology. More specifically, a lock
in detector is formed from a pinned photodiode. The photodiode
is modified to enable faster operation.

It is advantageous to obtain as much readout as possible to
maximize the signal to noise ratio. The pinned photodiode
provides virtually complete charge transfer readout.

Fast separation of the photo-generated carriers is obtained
by separating the diode into smaller sub-parts and summing the
output values of the subparts to obtain an increased composite
signal.

Brief Description of the Drawings

These and other aspects will now be described in detail with
reference to the accompanying drawings, wherein:

Figure 1 shows a basic block diagram of the system;

20 Figure 2 shows a block diagram of the multiple photodiode
parts;

Figure 3 shows a block diagram of the system as used in
range finding;

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Figure 4a and 4b show pixel layouts; and

Figure 5 shows a cross section of the pinned photodiode.

Description of the Preferred Embodiment

5 The present application uses a special, multiple output port
pinned photodiode as the lock in pixel element. The photodiode is
preferably part of a CMOS active pixel image sensor, of the type
described in US patent no 5,471,505. Hence, the system
preferably includes in-pixel buffer transistors and selection
transistors, in addition to the CMOS photodetector.

10 Figure 1 shows a pinned photodiode with four output ports,
labeled as out1-out4. Each of the output ports is used to receive
a reflection for a specified time duration. Each output becomes
a "bin". The counting of the amount of information in the bins
enables determination of the reflection time, and hence the
range.

15 Pinned photodiodes are well known in the art and described
in U.S. Patent No. 5,904,493. A pinned photodiode is also known
as a hole accumulation diode or HAD, or a virtual phase diode or
20 VP diode. Advantages of these devices are well known in the art.
They have small dark current due to suppression of surface
generation. They have good quantum efficiency since there are
few or no polysilicon gates over the photosensitive region.

Pinned photodiodes can also be made into smaller pixels because they have fewer gates.

The basic structure of the pinned photodiode lock in pixel is shown in Figure 1. Four switched integrators are formed respectively at four output ports. Each gate is enabled during a specified period. The different integrators integrate carriers accumulated during the different periods. The first integrator accumulates carriers between 0 and $\pi/2$, the second between $\pi/2$ and π , the third between π and $3\pi/2$ and the fourth between $3\pi/2$ and 2π time slots.

Assuming the light to be a cosine phase, then the phase shift of the detected light is given by

$$\arctan[(L1-L3)/(L2-L4)],$$

where L1, L2, L3 and L4 are the amplitudes of the samples from the respective first, second, third and fourth integrators. These four phases are obtained from the four outputs of the photodiode.

The first pinned photodiode 100 is connected to an output drain 102 via gate 1, element 104. This receives the charge for the first bin. Similarly, gates 2, 3 and 4 are turned on to integrate/bin from the second, third and fourth periods.

It is important to obtain as much signal as possible from the photodiode. This can be done by using a large photodiode.

However, it can take the electrons a relatively long time to escape from a large photodetector.

The present system divides the one larger photodiode into a number of smaller diodes, each with multiple output ports.

5 Figure 2 shows the system.

A number of subpixels are formed. Each includes a number of pinned photodiodes 200, each with four ports. Each of the corresponding ports are connected together in a way that allows summing the outputs of the photodiodes. For example, all the gate 1 control lines are connected together as shown. The outputs from all the port 1s are also summed, and output as a simple composite output. Similarly, ports 2, 3 and 4's are all summed.

Figure 3 shows the circuit and driving waveforms for the system when used as a range finder. A pulse generator drives selection of the active output. Each time period is separately accumulated, and output. If a 40 MHz pulse generator is used, 25 ns resolution can be obtained.

Figure 4A and 4B show representative pixel layouts. Figure 4A shows a 6 by 6 square micron pixel layout while Figure 4B shows an 8½ by 8½ micron pixel layout. In both Figures, four outputs are shown.

Figure 5 shows a cross sectional potential diagram of an exemplary pinned photodiode.

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Assuming the operation frequency of modulated light is 10 megahertz with a 25 nanosecond integration slot, the generator carrier has a time of flight within this limit. This resolution time constrains the size of the detector. In addition, the
5 characteristic diffusion time in a semiconductor device is L^2/D , where D is the diffusion coefficient. This time originates from the continuity equation and the diffusion equation, and defines how soon the steady state will be established in the area of size L. Hence, for a 10 cm square per second electron diffusion coefficient, the characteristic size of the pinned photodiode could be less than 5 microns.

Other embodiments are also contemplated to exist within this disclosure. For example, other numbers of output ports, e.g. 2-8, are possible. While this application describes using a pinned photodiode, similar operations could be carried out with other CMOS photodetectors, e.g., photodiodes and photogates.

Such modifications are intended to be encompassed within the following claims.